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ABSTRACT

A portfolio approach to classroom literacy assessment offers a different way to evaluate and document students' growth and progress in literacy. Portfolios place a high premium on using a variety of real literacy activities over a period of time which involves the interaction of teachers and students in the development and maintenance of the portfolio. To avoid the danger that the portfolio will become an unfocused collection of many pieces of information, teachers must think carefully about the purposes of the portfolio as it applies to curricular and instructional priorities. Steps need to be taken to help teachers accept portfolios if they are to have a chance to succeed as an innovative form of literacy assessment. (One figure--a checklist for student attitudes--is included.) (RS)

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Literacy Portfolios

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LITERACY PORTFOLIOS

In recent years a portfolio approach to classroom literacy assessment has been described in the literature (Mathews, 1990; Valencia, 1990). This approach has been stimulated, at least in part, by changes in reading curriculum and disenchantment with traditional modes of assessment. Portfolios offer a different way to evaluate and document growth and progress in literacy. In this article my focus will be reading. You can probably see ways to adapt the portfolio concept to include writing. Other sources (Jongsma, 1989; Krest, 1990; Simmons, 1990) offer some very helpful ideas for using writing samples in literacy portfolios.

Bases for Portfolio Assessment

According to Valencia (1990), there are four guiding principles that serve as the rationale for portfolios in literacy assessment.

1. Sound assessment is based on authenticity.
2. Assessment must be a continuous, on-going process that chronicles literacy development.
3. Assessment must be a multifaceted, multidimensional process to accurately reflect the complexity of the literacy process.
4. Assessment must provide opportunities for collaborative reflection by both teachers and students.

In essence, portfolios place a high premium on using a variety of <u>real</u> literacy activities over a period of time which involves the interaction of teachers and students in the development and maintenance of the portfolio.

Sources of Data for Portfolios

Many possible sources exist for portfolio data. Based on my experience and a review of the literature, the following are items that the classroom teacher could use in a student's portfolio:

- audiotapes of a student's reading

- video tapes of classroom reading activities (e.g., plays, discussions, partner reading)
- photographs of reading activities
- a listing of materials read (e.g., books, magazines)
- writing samples related to literacy experiences (e.g., pages from reading logs)
- a checklist of relevant reading behaviors
- student self-evaluations
- a thoughtful selection of student work on important reading skills or strategies (e.g., story map, comprehension)
- teacher observations and insights (e.g., attitudes toward reading, growth in discussion about stories and books, use of various word identification strategies)
- collaboratively (student and teacher) produced progress notes and checklists
- classroom tests

The large number of sources available for providing portfolio data make the selection process particularly important. One of the real dangers of portfolios is that they can become an unfocused collection of many pieces of information. Such an unorganized accumulation of bits and pieces of information will reduce their usefulness. To avoid this problem, you will need to carefully think about the purposes of the portfolio as it applies to your curricular and instructional priorities.

Designing Portfolios: Some Practical Considerations

Since portfolios are means to an end, you must first decide why you are using them. Consequently, you will need to establish the broad goals of your reading program that are consistent with the goals or objectives of your grade, school, district, or state.

Suggested Objectives. Many goals on objectives are possible; nevertheless, I believe that teachers and authorities in reading would support at least two broad objectives. The first objective can be expressed by the Illinois state goal for learning: students will be able to read,

comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and use written material. The focus of this goal is, in a single word, comprehension.

The second objective is directed toward creating students who are motivated to read and who have positive attitudes toward reading. This objective focuses our efforts on helping students read to satisfy personal needs. This objective might be: students will develop positive attitudes toward reading and will be motivated to read to satisfy their needs. The focus of this goal is to help students develop an appreciation of reading so it becomes something they do on a regular basis in the classroom, at home, and throughout their lives.

These two broad goals may also contain subgoals. You must be careful, however, not to have too many overly narrow objectives. Specificity could tend to fragment the reading process. For the first broad goal (comprehension), the seven general knowledge and skills related to this goal (Illinois State Board of Education, 1986) may be worthy of review, adaptation, and possible use. For the second goal (positive attitudes and personal reading), the following items may be possible subgoals:

- acquire a positive attitude toward reading.
- enjoy reading as a leisure-time activity.
- satisfy interests and needs through reading.
- achieve personal development through reading.

Suggested Format for Portfolios. Once you select your objectives, you will need to decide upon the actual portfolio. "Physically, it is larger and more elaborate than a report card. Practically, it must be smaller and more focused than a steamer trunk filled with accumulated artifacts" (Valencia, 1990, p. 339). What might you use? Boxes are probably too big to be practical. File folders may be small to hold work samples and audio tapes in a reasonably secure manner. Valencia suggests a large expandable file folder. I believe such folders are a good possibility, but they could be difficult to store unless you have a file cabinet in your room. Perhaps cardboard magazine holders would be a compromise. They are sturdy, have a place for the student's name, and can be easily stored on a shelf or window counter. Another choice might

be tough, plastic file crates that hold hanging file folders. Regardless of your choice for portfolios, they should be readily accessible to you and your students.

Managing Portfolios. Once you have determined the goals of the portfolio and selected something to hold the evidence, Valencia (1990) suggests two layers of information. The first is the actual data (e.g., reading logs, representative daily work, progress notes). The second is a summary sheet or some other means to help you synthesize the information. This second component is vital for the effective use of portfolios. For example, if one of your goals is to promote positive attitudes and personal reading, the checklist shown in Figure 1 might be adapted and used to record your observations and to evaluate the student's reading records in the portfolio.

Teachers in Orange County, Florida (Mathews, 1990) began modestly by including four core elements in their portfolios: 1) a reading development checklist, 2) writing samples, 3) a list of books read by the student, and 4) a test of reading comprehension. The checklist was used by teachers to record observations three times throughout the school year. These same teachers recognized the need to revise the components of the portfolio and to add additional pieces of information. Portfolios are a dynamic, not a static means of monitoring progress in literacy. If you remember this basic principle, the necessity to reevaluate portfolio contents on a regular basis is seen as an integral and essential part of the whole process.

Using Portfolios for Classroom Literacy Assessment

Portfolios are useful for all partners in the literacy program: students, teachers, parents, and school officials. Portfolios can also be used in conjunction with other sources of information (e.g., standardized tests, local assessments, class grades, teacher observation). Collaborative examination of portfolio contents with other students and the teacher can provide a means to discuss progress and important learnings as well as to add written notes relating to such examinations. Students should be taught how to maintain and manage their portfolios so excessive teacher time is not required. Plans can be made for the inclusion of other pieces of data that may be especially relevant. Toward the end of the school year, you could spend some

Figure 1. Checklist for Student's Attitudes and Personal Reading

Student _____ Grade _____ Teacher _____

Seldom			Sometimes			Often		
Oct.	Feb.	May	Oct.	Feb.	May	Oct.	Feb.	May

1. Possesses books or printed materials not assigned
2. Uses classroom library
3. Checks out books from school library
4. Voluntary shares outside reading
5. Talks with other students about reading
6. Seems to have a favorite author
7. Requests more reading about topics
8. Uses reading to satisfy personal interests
9. Reads for recreation
10. Chooses reading when choices are given
11. Reading reflects interests in _____
12. Applies ideas from reading to his/her life
13. Seems to enjoy reading
14. Participates in classroom book club
15. Participates in book exchange club
16. Parents report reading at home

time with each student to decide what stays and what goes home. The portfolio could then be "passed along as a continuing document from year to year" (Wolf, 1989, p. 37). Farr (see Jongsma, 1989) suggests a minimum of four student-teacher discussions on portfolios throughout the school year.

Most schools have parent-teacher conferences. Data from the portfolio could be used to show progress in the objectives that formed the basis for the portfolio. I know teachers who used "modified portfolios" during parent-teacher conferences long before the label "portfolio" appeared in professional journals. For example, one teacher used tape recordings of each student's reading early in the fall and just before conferences to supplement the written work the student kept in a folder. Viewed from this perspective, portfolios are not a new concept. The difference with current portfolios is the intentional effort of professionals to legitimize the important role that naturalistic, ongoing evaluation plays in literacy assessment. Such data may gain both validity and integrity. Also stressed is the role students play in helping to evaluate their own progress in achieving the important outcomes of the literacy program. Viewed from this perspective students have a personal responsibility and involvement in their progress as readers and writers.

Limitations of Portfolios

The potential of portfolios for monitoring literacy growth is great; nevertheless, like other assessment instruments, limitations do exist. Most of the limitations have very little to do with concept of portfolios. Practical concerns will likely limit portfolios from achieving their full potential. One concern involves the general level of acceptance among school officials and the public. The current trend for accountability is likely to question so-called innovative means of monitoring and evaluating student progress. Assuming that portfolios are readily accepted (and this is a big assumption), the heavy demands upon a teacher's time to use this type of assessment severely limit portfolios from reaching their potential. Even if teachers were willing to devote the necessary time

and energy to build and maintain portfolios, I doubt whether all staff members would readily embrace the process. Some veteran teachers may voice concerns that the practical problems and pain of change aren't worth the benefits of change. I disagree; however, initiating and monitoring portfolios do present genuine challenges. Steps need to be taken to help teachers accept the process if portfolios are to have a chance to succeed as an innovative form of literacy assessment.

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